

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: August 2, 2012

Agenda Item: Garr Canyon Ranch Conservation Easement-R3

Division: Fish & Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorse Course of Action

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background

FWP proposes to allocate \$50,000 of Access Public Land funds towards a conservation easement on the Garr Canyon Ranch, near Dell. The project is a joint effort between the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and FWP. RMEF and the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust have each committed \$100,000 toward the easement. RMEF would hold the conservation easement and FWP would be conveyed and manage the public access portion of the project. The easement would create two permanent access points supporting at least 250 hunting recreation days annually.

The Garr Canyon Ranch is a 2,800-acre parcel, of which about 1,086 acres of important wildlife habitat would be protected through the conservation easement. These acres include the native, mountain foothills habitat along a 5.75 mile common border with DNRC and USFS. The easement includes about 1/3 mile of Big Sheep Creek, an important spawning tributary to the Red Rock River. The property is important habitat for elk, mule deer, antelope, bighorn sheep and various predators. The ranch is part of a larger raptor staging and migration corridor and also supports abundant nesting and brood rearing habitat for species of concern like Ferruginous hawks and long billed curlews.

Public Involvement Process & Results

Upon endorsement FWP Region 3 will draft an environmental assessment and access management plan for the proposed Garr Canyon Ranch conservation easement and post it for public comment. Access is a major public concern in southwest Montana.

Alternatives and Analysis

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would not pursue this opportunity. RMEF could continue to pursue the conservation easement without the FWP financial contribution, but they are not in a position to administer the public access provisions. The project would most likely not be completed and subdivision and development of the property would likely occur, given the aesthetics of the property.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends preliminary endorsement by the FWP Commission to proceed with developing a conservation easement for this property with access management by FWP to protect and enhance habitats for numerous fish and wildlife species and provide hunter access.

Proposed Motion

I move for preliminary endorsement of FWP's effort to develop and acquire a conservation easement on the Garr Canyon Ranch, in cooperation with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.